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Quiet resistance speaks: A global literature review of the politics of popular resistance to climate adaptation interventions

Ana Maria Vargas Falla^{*}, Ebba Brink, Emily Boyd

Lund University, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Despite that climate hazards are increasingly felt across the globe, there is widespread and often subtle resistance to climate adaptation interventions. However, adaptation research and practice have largely focused on overcoming barriers to implementation. By presuming adaptation programs are welcome, they miss that many people oppose or refuse to participate in them, and the politics hidden behind such resistance. We review the emerging academic literature on resistance to climate adaptation and uncover how diverse forms of adaptation resistance generate deep insights into overlooked local needs and aspirations. While it could be expected that 'loud' forms of resistance, such as protests, prompted some adaptation initiatives to accommodate local needs, it was surprising to see the effects of 'quiet' resistance. Quiet adaptation resistance in the forms of false compliance, foot-dragging, and gossip helped affected communities to stay in their territories, maintain certain farming practices, contest exclusionary urban policies, or simply assert their agency and freedom. These results reflect that adaptation has adopted a narrow approach to development that omits the multiple and underlying causes of vulnerability – many of which are evident to those affected. We argue that even when such acts do not directly improve material conditions, they represent an alternative political engagement to reimagine adaptation considering the needs of marginalised groups beyond the participatory and community development approach. This article provides concrete examples of how quiet resistance to adaptation speaks that can help development practitioners and policy makers to better understand the limitations of adaptation initiatives and their implications for effective local security in the face of climate change. Political accountability to adaptation-targeted populations could improve adaptation investments, making them more relevant, socially sustainable, and responsive to local needs.

1. Introduction

"We are not drowning, we are fighting" was the slogan used by the social movement known as The Pacific Climate Warriors, which made it to World news headlines in 2014 when they blocked Australia's largest port with small canoes. This direct act of resistance aimed to disrupt the departure of ships loaded with coal – as a message to rich nations whose carbon emissions are causing climate change (McNamara & Farbotko, 2017). The resisters were rejecting not only the lack of action to reduce carbon emissions, but also the adaptation approach justified by labelling them, the residents of Pacific islands, as climate refugees (Ibid.). Community groups in Australia and some Pacific islands have organised to resist the narrative that presents them as victims and second-class citizens for invoking adaptation measures to help them. Yet, not everyone is free to partake in such organised and loud forms of protest. Marginalised

and vulnerable groups often engage in quiet acts to defy imposed climate adaptation initiatives, similar to those described by James Scott in *The Weapons of the Weak* (Scott, 1985).

The main argument of this paper is that Quiet Adaptation Resistance Speaks. Drawing on a review of case studies in the literature (see also Brink, Vargas Falla, & Boyd, 2023), it illustrates people's resistance to climate adaptation and shows that both organised and loud, and everyday and quiet forms of adaptation resistance generate insights into the politics of overlooked local needs and aspirations. Particularly novel is the perspective that everyday forms of resistance – in adaptation often dismissed as mere coping or lack of awareness – can carry political meaning, voice people's needs, and allow their participation in a political system that otherwise excludes them. We found that while resistance could imply unclear gains or even increased risk for resisters in the short term, such acts may generate shifts in policy or public opinion in

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ana_maria.vargas_falla@soclaw.lu.se (A.M. Vargas Falla), ebba.brink@lucsus.lu.se (E. Brink), Emily.boyd@lucsus.lu.se (E. Boyd).

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the long term. In the face of institutional and climate uncertainty, they can open up future pathways for resisters to act, access resources, or create an alternative ‘living law’ that can target exclusionary policies and help to redress inequality. While resistance surely has limitations, it underlines the importance of being able to influence one’s own life when it comes to adaptation. Meanwhile, we observe that resources continue to be wasted in adaptation initiatives that have limited capacity to achieve sustainable development and meaningful change (see also Eriksen et al., 2021).

Resistance is not a concept used in most of the academic literature on climate adaptation. Rather, as outlined in the rest of this Introduction, the field has been overwhelmingly concerned with overcoming barriers to implementation, without recognising that – or exploring why – people oppose or refuse adaptation initiatives (Armah, Ung, Boamah, Luginaah, & Campbell, 2017; Barnett et al., 2015; Berrang-Ford et al., 2021; Birk & Rasmussen, 2014; Eisenack et al., 2014).

The climate adaptation debate, which has its roots in natural science, has long been dominated by discussions about technical fixes, while the socio-political and historical context takes second place (Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, & Wisner, 2014; Nightingale et al., 2020; Ribot, 2022; Ribot, 2011; Ribot, 1995; Wisner & Lavell, 2017). Climate adaptation (or adaptation for short) refers to the process of adjusting to actual and expected climate and its effects, with the purpose of moderating or avoiding harm (IPCC, 2014). It often encompasses a wide range of actions, such as training and capacity building, protecting and rehabilitating infrastructure, restoring ecosystems that buffer against hazards, and preventing human settlement in risk areas (Berrang-Ford et al., 2021; IPCC, 2014; UNDRR, 2009). By focusing on adaptation as protection from climate hazards, many interventions have tended toward shielding people from climate events rather than ameliorating underlying local vulnerabilities generated by entrenched poverty, rural marginalisation, rapid urbanisation, unemployment, debt, and armed conflicts, among others (Barnett, 2020; Blaikie et al., 2014; Bohle, Downing & Watts, 1994; Ribot, 2014; 2022; Ribot, 1995).

In recent years, adaptation has emerged as a key issue on the agenda of most international development agencies, and it is mainstreamed in national and local development plans, policies and laws, and through a wide variety of initiatives. Efforts range from multilevel governance to large infrastructure projects, adaptation funds, climate urbanism, and nature-based and community-based solutions (Berrang-Ford et al., 2021; Bulkeley, 2021; Manuel-Navarrete, Pelling, & Redclift, 2011; Scoville-Simonds, Jamali, & Hufty, 2020). It is at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goal 13 on Climate Action, whose first target (13.1) reads, “Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries” (UN, 2015).

However, most efforts to mainstream adaptation into current development interventions fail to recognise the critical importance of power imbalances and climate injustices that reproduce imposed and often damaging “development as usual” situations (Scoville-Simonds et al., 2020, p. 1; Tschakert et al., 2023). Further, recent studies have shown that many adaptation interventions have failed to reduce vulnerability, especially in the Global South (Eriksen et al., 2021). Despite the apparent urgency, climate adaptation risks becoming a new failed model for development, notably because it departs from a climate reductionist approach to vulnerability (Hulme, 2011), applying solutions designed by ‘experts’ but that are disengaged from the broader socio-economic, political, legal and historical conditions in which development takes place (Eriksen, Nightingale, & Eakin, 2015; Eriksen et al., 2021; Funder, Mweemba, & Nyambe, 2018; Nagoda & Nightingale, 2017; Nightingale et al., 2020; Scoville-Simonds et al., 2020). Indeed, a recent comprehensive systematic review of over 48,000 scientific articles on climate adaptation highlights that there is no clear evidence on whether it is leading to societal transformation, and that very little attention is given to understanding of local social and political implications of these interventions or to the array of possible barriers (Berrang-Ford et al., 2021).

In recent years, the top-down perspective has been challenged, not least through emerging research on community-based or locally-led adaptation, founded on premises such as supporting “local people to determine their own adaptation futures” (Westoby et al., 2021, p. 313). This perspective criticises how the mainstream focus on technical fixes overlooks whose knowledge and solutions are prioritised and implemented (Scoville-Simonds et al., 2020; Tschakert et al., 2023) and how it, in this process, neglects the conflicts and opposition that adaptation initiatives often face on the ground (Chu, Anguelovski, & Roberts, 2017; Eriksen, Nightingale, & Eakin, 2015; Manuel-Navarrete et al., 2011). Moreover, evidence from the field of critical adaptation shows how power is reproduced or contested in different initiatives (Eriksen et al., 2015), hinting that adaptation processes are influenced by economic and political interests (Chu et al., 2017; Chu, 2018; Manuel-Navarrete et al., 2011; Weinstein, Rumbach, & Sinha, 2019). The longstanding research on vulnerability has made an important contribution to the debate, pointing to the multiple underlying causes of vulnerability that adaptation overlooks or simply ignores (Watts & Bohle, 1993; Ribot, 2014).

While resistance to adaptation has been observed, little attention is paid to the diverse ways that people defy or resist top-down adaptation processes, the motives behind these forms of resistance, and their consequences (Woroniecki, 2019). The focus on resistance adds a layer to the previous literature, bringing to the debate people’s agency, which is often forgotten as efforts concentrate on highlighting the structural conditions that frame vulnerability (Fedele, Donatti, Harvey, Hannah, & Hole, 2019; Thomas et al., 2019). Since resistance is an established topic in the wider academic literature (Bayat, 1997; Merry, 1995; Scott, 1985), marrying the two perspectives can guide further critical studies on adaptation resistance and provide urgent insight into the gains that can be achieved through vulnerable groups’ resistance, even when they are small or intangible.

Drawing on the sociological concepts of popular and everyday resistance (Scott, 1985) and the quiet encroachment of the ordinary (Bayat, 2000), this article explores the forms of resistance to adaptation (everyday/quiet and organised/loud), why people resist (motives), and how it matters (political consequences). Adaptation resistance is broadly defined as an oppositional act to the power exerted through adaptation initiatives (inspired by the definition of Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016). Rather than providing a formula to overcome resistance and achieve a quick fix, we argue that a resistance-informed approach to adaptation opens up new alternatives: seeing vulnerable individuals as active agents with a voice that needs to be heard and considered – even if that means, in some cases, project failure.

2. Popular resistance: A conceptual framework

The concept of popular resistance, as developed in the fields of sociology and anthropology, can shine a light on acts of contestation to climate adaptation. The leading definition is James Scott’s (1985, 1989) understanding of everyday resistance as a ‘weapon of the weak’. Described as “an integral part of the small arsenal of relatively powerless groups” (Scott, 1989, p. 34), everyday resistance can take the form of foot-dragging, feigned ignorance, or sabotage. Scott argues that political scientists and journalists have historically overlooked the vast range of political acts of marginalised groups, as they are conducted in a more silent way and lack collective performance. He contested traditional ways to describe vulnerable groups as lacking political interest or simply not having the time and capacity to engage in politics, showing with vivid examples how marginalised groups engaged in politics through acts of everyday resistance that aim to contest authority and reclaim autonomy (Scott, 1985). In Scott’s view, everyday forms of resistance are the ordinary means for marginalised groups to have a political voice (Scott, 1989). His and other key resistance works help classify the forms, motives, consequences, and political implications of popular resistance.

2.1. Categorising acts of resistance by form

Resistance does not come from nowhere. It emerges from, and is constrained by both situational and historical conditions, and power configurations, and it takes different forms (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016; Lilja, Baaz, Schulz, & Vinthagen, 2017). People can use counter-narratives, ignore or contest the law, engage in direct action or demonstrations, or simply refuse to change a behaviour (Brink et al., 2023). Acts of resistance are often characterised as a function of their visibility (loud versus quiet), or level of organisation (individual versus organised). Loud resistance is often organised and has been particularly studied in the context of social movements; examples include strikes, land seizures, demonstrations, riots, rebellions and protests (Lilja et al., 2017; Smith, 2006; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Quiet resistance, synonymous with Scott’s everyday resistance, refers to more subtle hidden, and spontaneous forms of opposition; it avoids public attention, and instead uses mechanisms such as foot-dragging, gossip or avoidance (Scott, 1985). Table 1 illustrates the most common typologies used to map resistance.

While these typologies are useful to understand the basic forms of resistance, binary definitions can collapse a spectrum, and we recognise that there are hybrid forms. Not all individual, small-scale and unorganised forms of resistance are ‘everyday’ or ‘hidden’, but they can also be glaring and extraordinary, with large-scale, cumulative effects (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2018). The increased use of social media illustrates how resistance can be both overt and hidden, as people use the anonymity of the internet to oppose government policies and initiatives (online resistance).

Moreover, readers should keep in mind the fluidity of social life: groups often combine overt and organised resistance with more subtle forms, and the latter is sometimes credited as laying the foundations for the former (Eckstein, 2001; Vargas, 2021). This observation is reflected in Bayat’s theory of quiet encroachment, which refers to loose, informal and kin-based networks of resisters, who quietly and individually encroach on the powerful at the day-to-day level; however, when these gradually won gains are threatened, such networks can turn loud and organised (Bayat, 2000; Lilja & Vinthagen, 2018).

2.2. Motives or intent

A key question in the resistance literature is whether resistance should have a clear intent (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Everyday acts of resistance, in particular, require careful scrutiny of the underlying intent. For some authors, resistance presumes intent, otherwise it becomes another action such as non-compliance, or the result of ignorance or confusion (Eckstein, 2001). The sociology of law literature shows that although non-compliance can indeed be political, founded on an act of resistance to authority, it can also be strategic, based on a rational calculation of cost and benefit, or cultural, based on values and traditions (García Villegas, 2013). Others prefer to see resistance as a practice that counteracts power, even if there is no clear political intent (Scott, 1989). In this case, the resister may not be aware of the act of

resistance, or articulate it as such. In the present paper, we adhere to the position that resistance can be the result of coping and survival strategies that are not framed as political, but that have political motives and/or implications (Vargas Falla & Urinboyev, 2015). This kind of covert resistance is present in the work of James Scott, Michel de Certeau, Judith Butler and Antonio Negri (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016).

2.3. Gains or consequences of resistance

The empirical study of resistance can also look at its consequences. Resistance studied in connection with social movements has showed how collective action and social mobilisation lead to social change by shifting public preferences, creating political access, winning legal cases, and appealing to international politics (Kolb, 2007; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). However, the work of James Scott (1985) revolutionised resistance studies by showing that most of the time, acts of resistance are of everyday nature; they are silent and uncoordinated but yet, they have important consequences. They can create the ground for social revolutions, but they can also create smaller gains such as the quiet encroachment of people living in informal settlements (Bayat, 2000).

Bayat (2000) nuances the political consequences of resistance, using a language of gains and costs. Focusing on the urban poor, he differs between those acts of resistance that produce gains (consequences for the resisters) at the cost of fellow citizens or the resisters themselves, and those that produce gains at the cost of the “state, the rich and the powerful” (Bayat, 2000, p. 543). The latter are encroachments, which can be considered as having political consequence. In Bayat’s view, quiet encroachment is a key political tool that does not, however, achieve societal transformation. Societal transformations require social organisation.

Other scholars argue that small acts of resistance increase people’s dignity and emancipation, which, in many cases, can be a first step for social change and represent an alternative form of political engagement (Scott, 1985; Vargas Falla & Urinboyev, 2015). Little by little, people using small acts of everyday resistance have been able to access land and make many laws obsolete, by creating a parallel set of rules that operate as living law (Nelken, 2008; Vargas, 2016). As shown by sociolegal scholars, resistance can exert political pressure, but it can also lead to a lack of enforcement and underline the irrelevance of formal institutions (Ewick & Silbey, 1991; García Villegas, 2013).

2.4. Resistance as an alternative form of political engagement

Taken together, these concepts help us analyse acts of resistance, seen as alternative forms of political engagement. While traditional forms of engagement rely on participation in political parties, voting, social movements and other formal mechanisms, various scholars highlight the importance of ‘everyday politics’ as an alternative form of political engagement (Beveridge & Koch, 2019; Tria Kerkvliet, 2009). This perspective does not see engagement as something that is enabled for, or done to, citizens, for instance through invited spaces of participation (Cornwall, 2004), but rather as a bottom-up, critical stand against

Table 1
Typology of resistance

Form	Discursive	Physical-material
Level of organisation	Narratives can be used to reject power	Engaging in direct actions, but also ignoring the law or refusing to change.
	Collective	Individual
Visibility	Social movements, but also sporadic social mobilisation (Scott, 1989).	It does not require coordination, but it is performed by individuals alone. Sometimes can have cumulative effects when many resist (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2018).
	Loud/OvertIt	Quiet/Covert
	can include strikes, land seizures, demonstrations, riots, rebellions and protests (Lilja et al., 2017; Smith, 2006; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015)	It avoids public attention, and instead uses mechanisms such as foot-dragging, gossip or avoidance (Scott, 1985)

the goals and policies set out by certain elites (Carvalho, van Wessel, & Maesele, 2017). These alternative forms do not rely on formal political institutions or organised social movements, but rather on looser, spontaneous and unstructured mechanisms that, in some cases, have the power to overthrow wide-ranging policies and programs, making them obsolete (Kerkvliet, 2018). In other cases, such acts give individuals a sense of autonomy and freedom (Vargas, 2016). Thus, regardless of what concrete gains are made, we assert that resistance is always political. Further, all forms of resistance can help researchers to study people's needs and aspirations in a more comprehensive way.

Thus, we examine how both organised and loud, and everyday and quiet forms of resistance to adaptation can constitute alternative forms of political engagement, and we investigate their motives and consequences.

3. Methods

This literature review is inspired by the methods and guidelines for qualitative reviews (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005) that aim to synthesise the state of knowledge, and identify key themes and narratives. The key limitation of the method is that it relies on secondary data and is therefore restricted to the findings, methods and scope used by the original authors. The present study does not seek to assess the methodological validity of the reviewed studies; instead, we assume that publication in a peer-reviewed journal assures a basic level of quality.

We limited the scope to peer-reviewed articles, published in academic journals in English that reported on specific case studies. As the search was conducted in October 2019, some key articles that were published later were not included (e.g., Mendes Barbosa & Walker, 2020). We limited our analysis to the selected period, as the aim of this exploratory review was to provide analytical tools for further studies, rather than a strict quantitative analysis.

The search focused on articles that studied different forms of resistance or contestation to climate adaptation projects, initiatives, laws or narratives. The search string¹ used included different synonyms for adaptation and resistance, to account for that authors may not use the same words to describe subtle forms of resistance. The search used the Web of Knowledge database, one of the largest and most comprehensive search engines for peer-reviewed articles, which resulted in 208 initial hits. Skimming reference lists and asking colleagues for key publications in this field identified 40 other potential articles. Finally, our in-depth analysis of abstracts and later full papers narrowed the search to 56 articles in which either the informants themselves, the authors (first-hand observers) or us (second-hand observers) identified resistance to adaptation. Given that more than 48,000 climate adaptation studies have been published in the past 20 years (Berrang-Ford et al., 2021), it is notable that we could only identify 56 articles that mentioned some form of contestation or opposition. Common reason for exclusion was that articles used terms such as crop resistance or resistance by the state to mitigate climate change. We believe that there are (now) more articles dealing with adaptation resistance, but for the purpose of this qualitative review, this search was useful to situate different types of resistance and describe their motives and consequences.

Next, we extracted qualitative and quantitative data from each of the 56 papers and recorded it in an Excel database, by reading the articles against a pre-defined review protocol. Data included the geographical focus, methods, theories, words used to describe resistance, and whether or not the paper referred to legislation. In a supplementary, more

reflexive exercise, we extracted information on how we, as second-hand observers, identified instances of resistance, who were the actors, the type of adaptation they were resisting, their motives, and the consequences. This second-hand analysis of data collected previously by other researchers aimed to take "a second (and third) look beyond the explicit or unreflectively taken for granted" (Walsh, 2003, p. 51). While this second interpretation may be very distant from the initial social reality, it is useful to re-examine interpretations of acts that initially appear compliant, but that could subsequently support a more nuanced understanding of everyday forms of resistance.

In the analysis phase, different ways to categorise forms of resistance (see Section 2) were explored before settling on the simplest division of everyday/quiet versus organised/loud, as it provides a clear picture of the most common forms. After reviewing forms and motives, and the final analysis focused on the consequences of acts of resistance, as this was particularly interesting to understand its effectiveness and relevance.

4. Findings: forms, motives and consequences

Evaluations of climate adaptation initiatives often focus on finding ways to remove barriers and constraints, assuming that adaptation is good and necessary (Antwi-Agyei, Dougill, & Stringer, 2015; Eisenack et al., 2014; Measham et al., 2011; Sietz, Boschütz, & Klein, 2011). On the contrary, this article departs from the extensive critique of a reductionist adaptation agenda in development, which normalises adaptation to climate change as the major problem people are dealing with, thereby erasing the historical and contextual socio-economic and political conditions that makes climate change only one part of their daily vulnerability (Blaikie et al., 2014; Bohle et al., 1994; Ribot, 2014; 2022; Wisner & Lavell, 2017). The findings in this section show how adaptation resistance plays out, highlighting the quiet and everyday forms, which often require a deeper analysis and careful observations in the field.

4.1. Identifying diverse forms of resistance

We found diverse cases reporting on quiet forms of adaptation resistance (Table 2). They included the discrete rejection of adaptation initiatives, false compliance, gossip and withdrawal from projects, quiet encroachment in informal settlements, and the use of counter-narratives, among others. Case studies reporting on loud forms of resistance included the use of legal claims by individuals (without being organised), but also more traditional forms of protest and demonstrations (Table 3). Our review found that acts of quiet and everyday resistance were more commonly studied in the context of weak state control and authoritarianism, while loud and organised resistance, as well as formal legal claims, were more commonly reported in states with more consolidated democratic systems and rule of law (see also Brink et al., 2023). However, readers should be aware that these findings likely represent the choices of individual researchers and research traditions as much as the 'real' occurrence of resistance.

4.1.1. Quiet and everyday forms of resistance

In many cases, climate adaptation interventions required active change, such as changing location, profession, livelihood, behaviour, practice or even attitude. Here, resistance can take the form of refusing to change. While, in some cases, quiet rejection may be unseen, or difficult to detect by researchers and policymakers, it is an act of resistance when it is counter to legislation designed to force people to change. Then, a lack of action becomes an act of going "against the law" (Silbey, 2005).

False participation and false compliance were observed when individuals pretended to engage in or comply with initiatives, but a deeper look revealed that they were circumventing adaptation. For example, a study of community-based initiatives in the Pacific islands noted that

¹ TITLE-ABS-KEY (social AND climate AND (resist* OR struggle OR protest* OR contest* OR contentious OR "non-compliance" OR defy OR defiance OR "social movement") AND ("climate change adaptation" OR "climate adaptation" OR "disaster risk" OR "climate risk" OR (ecology* AND resilience) OR hazard OR flood* OR landslide OR "heat wave*" OR "heat stress" OR "sea-level rise"))

Table 2
Quiet/Everyday forms of resistance

Adaptation initiative	Resistance	Consequences
Ghana: A proposal for voluntary and permanent relocation of residents living along a riverbank (Addo & Danso, 2017).	Rejection: 66 % of the residents decided to stay and opt out of the relocation program.	Defending their territory: “Leaving this place would mean that our traditional system may break down and there wouldn’t be any place to return and call as home”.
Mozambique: Local governments offered relocation to rural residents living in a floodplain to move to a village in a higher and dryer area with the support of international donors (Arnall, 2019).	Rejection: Many residents expressed reluctance to relocation and from those who moved, 20% to 30% of the households returned to the floodplains.	Defending their territory: The relocation zone was dry and therefore they experienced drought. Returning to the flooding areas, they gained back the possibility to continue with previous farming activities.
South Africa: The construction of gravel platforms to temporarily relocate flood-exposed homes in an informal settlement (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2019).	Rejection: Many residents refused to relocate since they did not agree on the temporary action and did not want to move twice	Project change: The local government only constructed 3 of the 6 planned platforms. People that moved there were mainly interested in getting access to electricity and other social services.
Vanuatu: Community-based projects supported by donors and implemented in Pelle Island including initiatives to create livelihood transition and increase fresh water (Buggy & McNamara, 2016).	Gossip, false participation, and withdrawal: Members of the community did not support or contribute to the project. They simply withdrew from participating in meetings and gossiped about elite capture.	Project failure: Resistance has been effective in stopping projects, providing a voice to marginalised groups – but this may lead to donors withdrawing support and waste of resources that could have been better used.
Kenya, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Uganda: Multiple projects including green spaces in flooding areas, some included evictions of residents of informal settlements (Douglas, 2018).	Foot-dragging: People in informal settlements rejected evictions, returned to the informal settlements, finding excuses and complaining about the places of relocation.	Defending their territory and claiming climate justice: Overall, people manifest a sense of injustice in the forced relocations motivated by climate change, which they have not caused directly.
Kenya: A national ban on renting wells and lending land to nomadic groups in times of drought (Eriksen & Lind, 2009).	Non-compliance: Well owners started renting out their wells to Orma and Somali pastoralists.	Autonomy but hunger: People rely less on livestock which has also generated more poverty as there is less trust and networks of support.
Tanzania: A ban on local crop varieties that require a lot of rain with the provision of seeds of more drought-resistant crops (Naess, 2013).	False compliance: Farmers planted the resistant crops on the areas near the roads and kept local varieties in the main farming areas, as they were considered of better taste.	Hunger: Many farmers reported being more exposed to hunger because of low crop productivity. At the end, many farmers changed to the new crops by their own choice.
São Tomé and Príncipe: A national government project about capacity building, climate-proof infrastructure, and resilient livelihood strategies, financed by the Least Developed Countries Fund (Mikulewicz, 2019).	Gossip and withdrawal: Community members talked about projects benefiting only community leaders, refusing to participate in them.	Self-dignity: People’s views have been silenced despite some consultative events, with a dominant narrative about increasing agricultural productivity.

Table 2 (continued)

Adaptation initiative	Resistance	Consequences
Burkina Faso: Livelihood diversification to adapt to drought in the Sahel (Nielsen & Reenberg, 2010).	Rejection and ridicule: People of the Fulbe ethnicity rejected the alternative livelihoods that were deemed ‘non Fulbe’ and ridiculed those who worked for projects or did gardening or labour migration.	Freedom but diminishing gains: People kept their freedom and preferred way of living in the bush, which worked to adapt to environmental changes – until recently, when surrounding land is becoming more populated and cultivated.
Ethiopia: The construction of soil and water conservation structures and forming user associations (Gebreyes, 2018).	Absenteeism, foot-dragging and vandalism: Since people are expected to contribute to the construction of infrastructure with their labour, they delivered poor results or simply delayed participating.	Destroying infrastructure Projects were delayed and infrastructure was poorly made. In some cases, farmers “ploughed them, little by little, until the structures are destroyed.” (p. 130)
Cameroon: A government decree that made illegal the construction of new fishing canals and the maintenance of existing ones (Laborde et al., 2016)	Actively opposing and circumventing: Farmers continued to build canals despite the ban, paying “informal taxes” to local authorities who also disregard the national ban.	Making the law obsolete: An overall reduction in the number of fish as well as environmental degradation. The government law has been proven obsolete and inefficient.
South Africa: Capacity building program for supporting adaptive capacity among people living in poverty (Spires & Shackleton, 2018)	Alternative narratives: Affected groups rejected the focus on climate change, which they saw as far away from their immediate needs.	Project failure: People continued with their lives.

local residents quietly withdrew from an adaptation project, which resulted in its failure (Buggy & McNamara, 2016). Foot-dragging, that is, purposely working slowly or delaying action (Douglas, 2018; Gebreyes, 2018; Hardoy & Ruete, 2013; Henrique & Tschakert, 2019; Jordhus-Lier, Saaghus, Scott, & Ziervogel, 2019) and ridiculing those who engage in adaptation projects (Nielsen & Reenberg, 2010) were other covert forms of resistance found in the literature. Communities used creative approaches to avoid the penalties of non-compliance. A local ban required Tanzanian farmers to switch to a less water-thirsty crop (Naess, 2013). Aware of the consequences of non-compliance, but also of the difficulties of enforcing the ban, farmers changed the crops growing by the side of the road but continued to grow traditional crops in the remaining land (Ibid.).

Many acts of everyday resistance imply active defiance of the state’s power over daily life. The most common example was the continuous expansion of informal settlements, despite relocation initiatives or forced evictions (Hardoy & Ruete, 2013; Henrique & Tschakert, 2019; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2019). However, everyday resistance extends beyond top-down interventions or projects. It was also found in the context of gender hierarchies in adaptation. For example, Caretta and Börjeson (2015) studied local gender contracts and adaptive capacity in smallholder irrigation farming in the Kenyan drylands. Everyday resistance was illustrated by women sitting at the back of the room during meetings they were not invited to, rejecting the traditional weather forecast made at these meetings, and defying a traditional ban on women entering irrigation canals.

These examples can provide an alternative explanation for why people resist climate adaptation and, more diverse than ‘climate scepticism’ as framed in the North, they showed the myopia of adaptation projects that disregard people’s capacities, their pressing needs and their aspirations.

Table 3
Loud and organised resistance

Adaptation initiative	Overt resistance	Consequences
US (Alaska-Shishmaref tribe): A voluntary property buyout scheme for homes affected by sea-level rise (Marino, 2018).	Counter-narrative: Claiming relocation as a community.	Recognition: Demonstrated in President Obama's visit to their land.
US: Building large-scale river diversions (Lewis & Ernstson, 2019).	Direct action: Placing signs of Hurricane Katrina's victims outside water diversion projects. Also sharing a counter-narrative in different forums.	Producing a counter-narrative: Contesting the "scientific" knowledge of large infrastructure projects.
Austria: Hazard maps declaring some zones as flooding areas, increasing insurance costs (Seebauer, Ortner, Babicky, & Thaler, 2019).	Protest: Demonstrations and joint petitions to the government to change the flooding maps.	Recognition: Increased recognition but not being able to achieve legal change.
Pacific islands (Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu)/ Australia: The global narrative on sinking islands that have no other choice than to help their citizens as climate refugees (McNamara & Farbotko, 2017).	Direct action: Paddled out in traditional canoes to prevent coal ships entering and leaving the port to show that rich nations have a responsibility for mitigation and adaptation.	Global recognition: Mentioned by The Guardian as one of the most important sustainability campaigns of 2014.
Mozambique: A Participatory development plan in an informal settlement in Maputo as part of an action research project (Broto et al., 2015).	Formal rejection: Residents rejected the proposal of relocation by the municipality using the official consultation mechanisms.	Project failure and putting forward other community claims: The relocation project was officially rejected, but the community also showed their own priorities for adaptation which included: improving water provision, waste management, and road maintenance, among others.
Peru: Privatization of floodgates to US multinational company (Carey et al., 2012).	Direct action and protest: Local stakeholders seized the gates through mobilisation and protest with support from local authorities and police.	Temporary gains: Local residents maintained control of the gates for two years until a court order gave back the control to the multinational company.
Sri Lanka: Ecosystem based adaptation (Woroniecki, 2019).	Social mobilisation: To get the state to recognise their needs beyond adaptation.	Project change: Organised social groups were able to push for a road on the top of a reservoir.
Cambodia: Relocation to give space to an irrigation project (Hunsberger, Work, & Herre, 2018).	Protest: Citizens demonstrated against poor land compensation.	Increased compensation: Citizens resisting the initial compensation received additional compensation for sugar palm trees, rice land, house land, and mango trees.

4.1.2. Loud forms of resistance

We used the term loud resistance for overt, visible acts and open rejection, even if they are made by individuals who lack formal organisation. Loud resistance could be organised, including traditional

protests, political lobbying, and direct confrontation, but it could also be done by individuals such as those using legal claims. One example is a group of coastal residents in Sweden who appealed against adaptation plans (Brink & Wamsler, 2018).

While we found cases of loud resistance both from the Global North and South, social mobilisation requires effort, time and resources that are not always available to vulnerable groups, particularly in the context of the Global South.

Direct confrontation has also been used to oppose certain types of narratives and to recast responsibility, as showed by the blockade of Australia's biggest port cited at the beginning of this article. The purpose of the Pacific Climate Warriors, who used traditional canoes to stop the coal ships from entering and leaving the port for the day, was to contest being labeled as victims of 'sinking islands', assert their agency, and show that rich nations have a responsibility with respect to adaptation (McNamara & Farbotko, 2017).

4.1.3. Hybrid forms of resistance

Social life is often complex and fluid, thus it is unsurprising that some papers described multiple forms of resistance, or forms hard to classify as either quiet or loud (as in the case of online activism). For example, when floodplain dwellers in São Paulo were threatened by eviction due to an ecological restoration project, they used loud protests as well as delaying their relocation using foot-dragging and quietly returning to their vacant site after the relocation was completed (Henrique & Tschakert, 2019).

The role of the internet and social media further blurs the lines between different kinds of resistance, and how they may encourage each other. For instance, flood disaster survivors and other coastal homeowners in the United States used Facebook activism to raise awareness and share information in opposition of a new flood insurance law, while also relying on traditional protests to articulate their claims to legislators (Checker, 2017; Elliott, 2017). While a person may 'like' or share a post on social media to simply show support for a claim, these small and ordinary acts can help social movements to increase their power by bringing many individuals together and help a broader group to organise other forms of demonstrations. The case-study researcher observed how "the web's very abstractions and 'thin' interactions paradoxically enabled ... activists to ignore sometimes stark political differences and cohere around a common agenda and identity" (Checker, 2017, p. 126). While the example of online adaptation resistance in our review was from the Global North, rapid digitalisation is making the internet a site of resistance in the Global South (Giaretta & Giulio, 2018).

4.2. Motives for resistance expose needs, aspirations and hopes beyond adaptation reductionism

The literature revised showed a variety of motives behind acts of adaptation resistance (illustrated in Table 4). Some actions were motivated by a rejection of climate change narratives, while others were based on traditions and cultural beliefs. In some cases, economic reasons played a key role, and many papers reported multiple motives. The motives exposed the multiple needs (food, work, shelter, livelihoods, etc.) of people benefitting from adaptation interventions, their hope to maintain their autonomy from state control and exclusionary policies, and their daily struggle to overcome multiple vulnerabilities in which climate change represents only one threat.

The analysis of motives supports the literature that critically exposes adaptation initiatives as narrow top-down interventions that reduce people socio-economic and political realities to a single narrow casual explanation (Blaikie et al., 2014; Bohle et al., 1994; Hulme, 2011; Ribot, 2014). Resistance to domination showed distrust in the state and in international organisations, and the resulting inequality, exploitation, and exclusion that can be inherent in adaptation policies (Eriksen et al., 2015). For example, recent case study examples from Brazil and Colombia show how adaptation strategies for rich areas and the informal

Table 4
Motives for resistance

Motives	Examples
Not believing in climate change narratives	- People do not believe that the climate is changing, as it may not be manifest where they are or may not be relevant to their livelihood (Lo, Liu, Cheung, & Chan, 2019). - People may resist because they do not see adaptation as a manageable situation – i.e. feeling it is hopeless (Lawrence & Marzano, 2014).
Cultural and religious beliefs	- Strong attachment to the land (Addo & Danso, 2017; Birk & Rasmussen, 2014). - Attachment to practices that are seen as an important part of their identity beyond rational cost-benefit analyses (Laborde et al., 2016). - The belief in God's promise to Noah "that he will never again destroy this earth with flood" (Fair, 2018, p. 5).
Economic reasons	- Relocation will imply loss of livelihoods (Douglas, 2018). - Increased cost of new crops (García de Jalón et al., 2013). - Additional labour burden (Ndhlovu & Mpofu, 2016). - Low yields in new crops (Phiri et al., 2019). - Decreased property value (Brink & Wamsler, 2018).
Tokenist resistance	- Politically connected elites resist the law for their own benefit (Eakin, Eriksen, Eikeland, & Oyen, 2011).
Lack of trust in the government	- Distrust and suspicion of governmental authorities (Arnall, 2019; Mikulewicz, 2019).
Rejecting exclusionary policies	- Feeling excluded, not having a voice, and experienced expropriation "as unfair incrimination and punishment" (Zografos, 2017, p. 57).

settlements differ, not based on the risk assessment but because of the power of economic elites (Mendes Barbosa & Walker, 2020; Vargas Falla, Brink, Boyd, 2024).

4.3. Understanding consequences of resistance and their political implications

Our findings show that adaptation resistance has significant consequences, although these might not fit squarely into categories such as risk reduction and wider social transformation. In fact, analysing the consequences of quiet versus loud resistance (Tables 2 and 3, third column) illustrates that even quiet and everyday resistance produce effects and gains. Such gains were not limited to material improvements, but often concerned people's ability to make decisions about their lives (Table 5).

The most obvious gains were being able to overthrow adaptation plans, laws and programs, which proved to be an effective form of political engagement. Examples included the rejection of a development plan by the local government after citizens appealed (Broto, Boyd, & Ensor, 2015), the enactment of a new national water law (Carey, French, & O'Brien, 2012), and legislation that capped flood insurance rates and reconsidered risk maps (Checker, 2017). In these three cases, the law was used as a battleground to make gains, a tactic that allowed those resisting to push for alternative forms of adaptation. While staying in line "with the law", a term coined by legal consciousness scholars, citizens were able to play a game in which they could lose or win depending on many different circumstances (Merry, 1995; Silbey, 2005).

Other political wins were when the needs of affected communities were recognised, and their alternative ideas about the kind of adaptation they want were heard. This can take the form of democratic dialogue about differing interests, knowledge and power relations, sparked by citizens' counter-narratives (Ernstson, 2013; Ernstson & Sörlin, 2009). In some studies, resistance led to citizens learning about their rights, and

Table 5
Consequences of resistance

Consequences	Examples
Resistance at the cost of the resister	- It provides autonomy from state control, but people may increase their risk to experience hunger (Eriksen & Lind, 2009; Naess, 2013)
Autonomy and dignity	- Gossiping about international development programs that do not bring benefits to the communities (Mikulewicz, 2019)
Defending their territory	- In relocation projects people reject adaptation and claim the possibility to adapt on other terms, keeping their territories (Addo & Danso, 2017; Arnall, 2019; Douglas, 2018)
Project change	- Creating project adjustments due to people's rejection (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2019)
Project failure	- Withdrawing support for projects that eventually failed (Buggy & McNamara, 2016; Spires & Shackleton, 2018)
Making the law obsolete	- Creating an alternative "living law" that governs despite formal laws of adaptation (Laborde et al., 2016)
Increased political recognition	- Getting acknowledged in political discourses or media reports, but not being able to change the adaptation initiative (Marino, 2018; Seebauer et al., 2019).
Challenging a global narrative	- Gaining global recognition (McNamara & Farbotko, 2017).

being able to voice their concerns (Broto et al., 2015), or migrate under other terms (Farbotko, Stratford, & Lazrus, 2016; Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012). In many cases, marginalised groups proposed alternative forms of adaptation, challenging asymmetric power relations (Lewis & Ernstson, 2019). Organised resistance against climate adaptation initiatives led to increased government assistance to communities living in flood risk areas (Henrique & Tschakert, 2019).

Resistance can also shift global discourses on adaptation, encouraging donors and international NGOs to consider a wider variety of actors, knowledge and solutions when planning adaptation projects. An example is the campaign launched by Pacific islanders to block the largest port in Australia. In defiance of an adaptation narrative that painted them as future "climate refugees" from "sinking islands", the islanders wanted to send the message that countries like Australia, which are responsible for high emissions, need to take more responsibility for adaptation measures to protect neighbouring islands (McNamara & Farbotko, 2017; McNamara & Gibson, 2009). This direct act of resistance was considered by the British newspaper *The Guardian* as the second-most-important sustainability campaign of 2014 (McNamara & Farbotko, 2017).

In most of the cases presented above, achievements were the result of organised resistance based on political lobbying, legal claims and demonstrations, although there was also evidence of counter-narratives contributing to shifting public preferences, and creating access to the political debate at local, national and international levels.

Quiet, everyday forms of resistance also had important consequences. One example is creating a parallel set of rules that make formal legislation and institutions irrelevant to daily practice. This point is illustrated by both urban settlements and small islands, where residents have undermined relocation projects by refusing to move (Henrique & Tschakert, 2019). In other cases, residents have quietly returned to informal settlements after being resettled (Douglas, 2018). In rural settings, farmers have resisted laws and policies that banned or discouraged certain crops, and continued growing the seeds they preferred (García de Jalón, Iglesias, Quiroga, & Bardají, 2013; Naess, 2013; Ndhlovu & Mpofu, 2016; Phiri, Dube, Moyo, Ncube, & Ndlovu, 2019). While some see informal settlements as encroachments that are permanently vulnerable to state eviction and climate change, in many cases, residents have been able to effectively secure their land in the long term, and gain rights such as compensation (upon eviction or disaster impacts) or even formal tenure (Tassadiq, 2018). Thus, for vulnerable groups, resistance is an alternative form of action that can influence the

political outcomes of urban planning and farming policies. These gains are of course limited and many people still fight for access to services.

However, acts of resistance can also exclude or further marginalise more disadvantaged community members. Community organisation can favour conventional development goals, illustrated by the inclusion of a road at the top of a reservoir and resistance to women's economic empowerment through home gardens in a case study in Sri Lanka (Woroniecki, 2019). Sometimes the gains only benefit the most powerful. In Vietnam, the rise of crowd- and social media-sourced disaster relief, which challenges the authority of the state, has reshaped social contracts and led to an uneven distribution of aid (Christoplos, Ngoan, Sen, Huong, & Lindegaard, 2017).

Bayat (2000) prompts us to consider whether resistance is at the cost of resisters themselves or of those in more powerful positions. Resistance can arguably be at the cost of vulnerable communities, if they have to endure increased risk and vulnerability because of a lack of adaptation. An example is the Pacific islanders who refused to migrate from their islands and rejected their status as "climate refugees" (Farbotko et al., 2016). Although their actions impacted the global narrative on climate refugees, they continue to be exposed to sea-level rise and exclusionary migration policies. Similarly, vulnerable farmers who refuse to plant drought-resistant crops may put themselves and their surrounding communities at the risk of hunger (Naess, 2013; Ndhlovu & Mpofu, 2016; Phiri et al., 2019; Schipper, 2020).

5. Discussion: Understanding the resistance as an alternative form of political engagement

Can resistance matter for marginalised groups? The answer to this question is yes: in some of the successful cases, resisters have been able to contest global narratives or make projects obsolete, and in most cases, they were able to continue with their lives in the way they value, keeping their territories and livelihoods. People who engaged in resistance not only achieved tangible change, but they were also able to re-assure their autonomy and self-dignity. Resistance voiced their complaints about states and international institutions that impose adaptation projects against people's needs and aspirations.

While quiet, everyday resistance is regarded as a less effective way to achieve social change (Bayat, 2000), we found many studies that show important consequences. The case of residents of informal settlements and farmers showed how they were able to keep their lands and maintain their livelihood, but also express their distrust in state-led adaptation initiatives, their awareness of elite capture and political corruption, and manifest their knowledge of the multiple, everyday risks they are exposed to – of which climate change is only one (Pelling, Chow, Chu, Dawson, Dodman, Fraser, Hayward, Khirfan, McPhearson, Prakash, & Ziervogel, 2021; Sou, 2017). Thus, what may first appear as a lack of climate awareness can, in fact, shed light on long-term exclusion and the absence of political representation that has led to exclusionary adaptation initiatives and the omission of other viable options, something that has been reiterated in the vulnerability literature (Blaikie et al., 2014; Ribot, 2014; Wisner & Lavell, 2017). Everyday forms of resistance, sometimes dismissed as mere coping strategies, proved to have a political meaning to voice people's needs and allow their participation in a political system that otherwise excludes them (Vargas Falla & Urin-boyev, 2015).

An interesting finding shows how the use of social media has enabled new forms of resistance to emerge, by linking and connecting geographically dispersed social groups, and bridging the gap between everyday and organised resistance (Checker, 2017). Social groups use the internet to resist and avoid open confrontation. This kind of opposition is shallow, requires relatively little engagement, and allows the resister to maintain a degree of anonymity. However, online resistance can mobilise large groups across different territories and can push the political debate, especially when accompanied by offline social mobilisation.

Most adaptation projects reflected the socio-legal, political and economic context in which they are implemented. Everyday forms of resistance were commonly reported in the so-called Global South and legal claims were mostly found in the Global North. Protest and demonstrations were present in different contexts, but their effectiveness in achieving social change was not always met. Instead, many social movements had limited results, but they have been able to challenge national and international narratives and open spaces for other forms of resistance across multiple geographical places.

We should not romanticise resistance, or the ad hoc recognition of citizen's rights, as these informal structures can maintain the exclusion of disadvantaged groups (Tassadiq, 2018). In addition, resistance that entails opting out of adaptation can have potentially devastating consequences for vulnerable groups, who can continue to be exposed to, and unable to cope with, the harmful impacts of climate change and many other vulnerabilities. Resistance can perpetuate food insecurity or leave people unprepared and at high risk. According to Bayat (2000), this form of resistance should not be considered as a form of political engagement. However, unlike him, we argue that in some cases, resistance at one's own cost can dignify life through the simple contestation of authority and domination – therefore we should not dismiss the political implications of these acts. The hunger strike is the classic example (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2014). While the resister does not gain in the short term, in the long term such acts may generate shifts in policy or public opinion. They can also open up future pathways for resisters to access resources, or create an alternative 'living law' that can help to redress inequality, and end exploitation and exclusion. While resistance has diverse consequences, one cannot forget that resources continue to be wasted in adaptation initiatives despite their limited capacity to achieve sustainable and meaningful change (Eriksen et al., 2021).

It should also be noted that the uncertainty, the variability and the multi-scalar interactions that are associated with climate impacts make it hard to determine the long-term outcome of *any* adaptation intervention – and thus, it is not directly apparent who ultimately bears the cost of adaptation resistance. The success of an adaptation intervention is subject to many complex interactions between climate, hydrological and human systems, and the outcome may only become evident at aggregated spatial and temporal scales, or even change over time as conditions evolve. For example, planting drought-resistant crops might prove maladaptive for farmers in the long term, due to new pests or volatile markets (Schipper, 2020).

While resistance has limitations, it underlines the importance of being able to influence one's own life when it comes to adaptation. Thus, to quote Sen, development initiatives should aim to remove different "sources of unfreedom" that limit people's ability to enjoy their rights and agency (Sen, 1999). Watts also made this argument when he noted that empowerment is the ability to shape the political economy that shapes one's entitlements (Watts, 1991). Thus, resistance as a form of power and empowerment engenders such representation and response.

6. Conclusion

Rather than suggesting ways to overcome opposition to adaptation, this article sees the concept of resistance as a form of political engagement that should be embraced, understood and taken into account during democratic deliberations on adaptation. While the debate on popular resistance has a long tradition in disciplines such as sociology of law, political science and anthropology (Bayat, 1997; Burawoy, 1991; Merry, 1995; Scott, 1985; Vargas, 2021), it has not been actively included in studies on adaptation. Rather, the mainstream literature focused on removing barriers to adaptation sees resistance as something that must be overcome with capacity-building programs, reformed projects and awareness raising campaigns (Armah, Luginaah, Hambati, Chuenpagdee, & Campbell, 2015; Berrang-Ford et al., 2021; Eisenack et al., 2014). In this sense, the literature on adaptation could learn about the long-standing research in development studies that shows the failure

of top-down development interventions: poverty and hunger are not the result of lack of food, but unaccountable political systems and structures that determine access and distribution (Sen, 1993; Sen, 1970; Watts, 1991; Bohle et al., 1994).

The pace at which climate adaptation is being mainstreamed, not only in international development programs but also at national and local levels, requires us to recognise the right of affected communities to express dissent. While the Adaptation Fund established under the Kyoto Protocol is well-supported, and donors are making adaptation a priority, development actors cannot afford to waste resources on initiatives that neglect the concerns, knowledge, power imbalances, multiple sources of vulnerability and the injustices that are inherent to a complex issue such as climate adaptation. Even in community-based processes, internal power structures and gender hierarchies can exclude and expose the most vulnerable groups. Climate change is only one of the multiple stressors people living under poverty are dealing with in their daily lives, and for many, not the most pressing one.

In light of the above observations, we encourage researchers, government officials, project managers, donors and international development organisations to see resistance to adaptation in a new light and look beyond discourses focused on 'barriers to adaptation' and 'climate denial'. Greater participation and community engagement in development projects is not always the way to curb it. Rather, resistance can highlight the wider power structures that are in place beyond individual adaptation projects. We recommend researchers and policymakers to understand acts of resistance as important parts of a democratic society, as they allow for freedom of expression and dissent, and we hope that the approach taken here can help to identify and address underlying causes of climate vulnerability.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ana Maria Vargas Falla: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – Original draft. Ebba Brink: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – Original draft. Emily Boyd: Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Project Administration, Supervision, Writing – review & Editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Further reading

- Vargas Falla, A.M., Brink, E., Boyd, E., 2023. The law of the four poles: Legal pluralism and resistance in climate adaptation. (manuscript submitted for publication).